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## Welcome back, heroes!



**A big hug from a USO volunteer says welcome home for one of the 49th FW airmen who were greeted with a red carpet celebration upon their return to American soil.**

**by MSgt. Tom Allocco  
Photos by MSgt. W.C.Pope**

The airmen who supported the first strike of Operation Iraqi Freedom were the first returning troops to land at Westover last Saturday. They came home with lifelong bragging rights that they serviced the F-117s that delivered the four GBU 27 2,000-pound bombs on a Saddam bunker on the opening night of the campaign to liberate the Iraqi people.

The 73 airmen experienced a welcome fit for heroes when they touched American soil at Westover. The Patriot Wing spoke for all America when it cheered the 49<sup>th</sup> FW munitions systems and maintenance specialists who arrived here after a stop at Rota, Spain on their long flight from their F-117 air base in the AOR to Holloman AFB, N.M.

Brig. Gen. Martin M. Mazick, wing commander, stood at the C-5, shook hands and repeated 73 times, "Welcome back!"

Outside the bunting-draped passenger terminal they were welcomed by a cheering

group that ranged from World War II veterans to scampering children of Patriot Wing members. Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" from a tape player sounded the theme as USO members handed each airman a small American flag. Inside, there were sandwiches, cake, treats and, most important, calling cards to tell families that after three months overseas that America had just welcomed them home.

Unit pride was on the mind of F-117 crew chief SrA. Fernando Vasquez of Texas. "I'm part of the squadron that went out first, had the first strike of this war. It's kind of admirable that we were picked first, to take out a target that first night," he said.

For TSgt. Tom Osborn of Ohio, it was his third "welcome home" to America, having returned from Desert Storm in 1991 and then hearing the welcome home music in 1999 after Allied Force in Kosovo.

"It's awesome. A lot of these youngsters need to remember that there's people at home like the group here," he said of the welcome.

The heroes' welcome was the closing of a circle for SSgt. Robert Duke of Georgia. Twelve years earlier he had been a high school teen cheering the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne when they came home to Fort Benning. Now the F-117 avionics specialist was on the other side of the

*(continued on next page)*



**Brig. Gen. Martin M. Mazick greets TSgt. Tom Osborn, the first airman off the first plane bringing troops back to Westover from Iraqi Freedom.**

## Stealth airman bags a premier souvenir



**SrA. Stephen Palermi**

A simple red banner carried in his breast pocket is the proud souvenir of SrA. Stephen Palermi of Oregon, one of the F-117 munitions systems specialists who stopped here Saturday. Talking in the passenger terminal, he pulled from his pocket a "safe and arm" flag. The flag is from the seeker head of one of the first four GBU 27 2,000-pound bombs dropped by two F-117s on a Saddam bunker on the first night of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Palermi was one of three munitions systems specialists who delivered the four bombs on two trailers to the F-117s that night. They weren't told what the mission was, but they knew it was something special when they were alerted about midnight and told to keep radio silence.

As soon as Palermi pulled the flag out of his pocket in the passenger terminal he became a celebrity for Boston and Springfield TV cameras.

"My dad is a former Air Force pilot and he thought it was pretty cool," he said of the Iraqi Freedom souvenir.

Palermi plans to frame the flag and keep it as a family heirloom and memento of something important.

"Being part of a group that liberated a country is an amazing thing. I was eating at the club. I saw that statue being pulled down. Amazing," he said.

"I'm just happy to be back in the States," he said.

"My wife and mom and dad want me home. I'm trying my best," he said.

## Welcome... *(Continued from page 1)*

welcoming line. Holding a small American flag, he recounted 110 degree heat and a blinding sandstorm that ripped out tent pegs and brought his 76-member tent down around his head.

Among those greeting the troops was Bill Murray of Chicopee. In July, he will mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of being hit in the arm and chest as a 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division soldier in North Africa. Erwin Belorusky of East Longmeadow served with the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force as a machinist in China and came back to serve in Iceland during the Korean War. "It's just great seeing the guys coming home," he said.

"You did a wonderful job," a USO volunteer told TSgt. Kathy Riley of New Mexico, a supply NCOIC. Riley was with her squadron on the flightline on the first night when the two returning F-117 pilots came across on a flyby and landed. "When they raised their canopies, everyone cheered."

Another memory is sitting in the mess tent watching TV as a Saddam statue toppled.

Between those two events "we liberated a lot of people who were living in fear. These people don't have to live in torment. I think our being a first strike unit made a difference," she said.

"We think we accomplished the mission," she said.

## Family Fun Day

A free Family Fun Day will be held on Friday, April 25 at the Hampshire Regional YMCA in Northampton.

The event begins with a pizza dinner at 6 p.m., followed by a "Mad Science" show from 6:45-7:30 p.m. The evening wraps up with activities including swimming, basketball, and air hockey from 7:30-9:30 p.m.

The free dinner and show are being donated by local businesses to support the families of military men and women.

Reservations are required by calling (413) 584-7086.



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## PATRIOT FLOWER POWER -

An early and much welcomed sign of spring at Westover is a flowering magnolia which frames a C-5 tail. The tree stands next to the Wing Headquarters building.

—photo by MSgt. W.C.Pope

## Pat Stats

Served since Feb. 2, 2003  
4,010 passengers - 1,365 aircraft  
14,501,866 pounds of cargo  
Info from TSgt. Kevin Nee, 42APS

### Meals

7,543 hot meals served  
Box lunches: 4,423  
Info from TSgt. David Beauregard, 439SVS

### Fuel since Feb. 1

8,013,531 gallons of JP-8  
Info from Jim Maloney, Fuels

## USO Easter baskets add cheer to holiday

More than 50 military families enjoyed a more bountiful Easter celebration after receiving holiday food baskets from the Pioneer Valley USO food pantry in Building 1100. Children also received candy baskets to make Easter a more festive occasion.

Each family Easter food baskets included a ham or turkey donated by community groups.

Those who donated included St. Luke's Greek Orthodox Church, East Longmeadow, Chicopee Kiwanis and Rotary members and employees of the Northern Correctional Facility in Sommers, Conn.

Mt. Holyoke College donated Easter candy for the children.

## Express-ions

